

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Inspiration and Canonicity

Session 2, 6-min. Video Overview

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You know the Bible, it's got to be one of the most influential books in all of human history, right? I mean, it's shaped entire civilizations and guided billions of lives. But have you ever really stopped to ask, where did it actually come from? Okay, let's do that. Let's dive in and trace the incredible journey of these texts from their ancient origins all the way to the book we know today.

So think about the core challenge here. It's just immense. According to the source material, this isn't just about some old book.

It's about how a message believed to be divine could possibly survive for millennia. We're talking about thousands of years of human history with all its wars and mistakes and changes. How does it get through all that? Let's trace that journey together.

To really wrap our heads around this, our source breaks the whole thing down into four key stages. You can think of this as our roadmap for this explainer. We'll start with the initial spark of inspiration, then move to how the books were chosen, and then get into the nitty-gritty of how they were copied and translated over and over again.

Alright, let's start at the very beginning with step one, inspiration. This is the big idea, the theological starting point, the belief that the Bible's content didn't just come from smart people with good ideas, but from a divine source. Now, this is where it gets really interesting.

The Bible itself uses a specific Greek word to describe this process. Theopneustos. And that literally means God-breathed.

So we're not talking about a vague sense of being inspired, like an artist having a sudden idea. The concept here is that the words themselves are breathed out from God and into the prophets, who then wrote them down. It's a much more direct idea.

And this quote right here really nails the point. The central claim is that this isn't a human invention. It's saying that prophets weren't just sharing their own opinions or philosophies.

They believed they were being carried along, like a ship by the wind, by a divine force to deliver a very specific message. And what's fascinating is that this inspiration wasn't some one-size-fits-all thing. Not at all.

The source material shows a huge variety of methods. You've got these epic face-to-face encounters with Moses, but you also have writers like Luke acting like a historian. You know, interviewing eyewitnesses and doing his research.

You even have the Apostle Paul quoting pagan poets because he saw a glimmer of truth in what they were saying. So you have all these different methods, but they're all attributed back to that one single source. Okay, so you have all these different inspired writings floating around.

But obviously, not everything that was written back then made it into the Bible. So who decided? How was that choice made? Well, that brings us to our second step, the whole process of canonization. So what exactly is canonization? Well, it wasn't some king or committee making a top-down decree.

According to our source, it was more of a grassroots thing, a community process. The people of faith themselves, over time, had to recognize and agree on which texts really carried that weight of divine authority. And you can see this happen right away with certain texts.

I mean, when Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, there wasn't a big debate that lasted 300 years. Nope. They were pretty much immediately accepted as God's Word and put in the most sacred place they had, the Ark of the Covenant.

Now, that was a clear-cut case. But for a lot of other books, the process took centuries of reflection and debate within the community to finally reach a consensus. So, once the books were chosen, the next massive challenge was just keeping them safe and accurate.

And this brings us to step three, transmission. This is all about the crucial human element in the story: that long chain of scribes who had the painstaking job of keeping these texts alive, one copy at a time. Yeah, and it's so important to get the difference between these two things.

First, you have transmission. That's all about accuracy. Can you imagine copying a thousand-page book perfectly by hand over and over and over for centuries? Then you have translation, which is our fourth step.

How do you take a word from ancient Hebrew that has layers of meaning and find an equivalent in English? Both of these steps are incredibly difficult and open up all sorts of challenges. And that right there is the million-dollar question, isn't it? With so many human hands involved over so much time- I mean, scribes making mistakes, translators making choices- how can we possibly trust that what we have today is historically accurate? This is the exact point where critics have often focused their attacks. So, let's actually dig into that tension.

Our source material lays out some really fascinating cases where historical criticisms of the Bible were directly challenged and, in some cases, overturned by later archaeological discoveries. Okay, here's a classic example. The Bible mentions Abraham owning camels way back around 2000 BC.

For a long, long time, critics pointed to this and said, aha, an error. They claimed it was an anachronism because the historical evidence at the time suggested camels weren't domesticated until about 800 years later. But then, archaeologists started digging at this ancient site in Syria called Ebla, and they unearthed these incredible tablets from 2400 BC.

That's a full 400 years before Abraham was even around. And what do they find on those tablets? Yep, records of domesticated camels. All of a sudden, that criticism didn't really hold water anymore.

Or how about this one? This one's even bigger. The Bible mentions this group of people, the Hittites, dozens and dozens of times. But for a while back in the 19th century, mainstream scholars were pretty much convinced they were a myth, just made up, because there were no other records of them anywhere.

The Bible, they said, just got it plain wrong. And then, this happened. Archaeologists in modern-day Turkey stumbled upon the ruins of Boğazköy.

Turns out, it was the massive, sprawling capital city of the Hittite Empire, complete with their libraries, their laws, their history. The critics were just wrong. This civilization the Bible talked about was absolutely real.

You know, even King David, one of the most famous figures in the whole Bible, came under fire. As recently as just a few decades ago, some prominent scholars were arguing he was probably just a legend, kind of like a King Arthur figure, because there was zero hard archaeological proof that he was a real person. And then, in 1993, this stone inscription was discovered.

It dates back to the 9th century BC, and it clearly refers to the House of David. This was the very first piece of extra-biblical evidence for David's dynasty. It was a huge discovery that directly countered the critics' claim that he was pure myth.

And get this, it's just amazing how specific this evidence can get. This little thing is a boula. It's basically a clay fingerprint from a signet ring, and it belonged to a man named Baruch.

So why does that matter? Because Baruch is named by name in the book of Jeremiah as the prophet's personal scribe, the guy who literally wrote down the words as Jeremiah spoke them. It's a real tangible link to someone directly involved in creating the text. It's just incredible.

So we end up right back where we started with this incredible tension. On one hand, you have a message that's believed to be God-breathed. On the other, it's been entirely entrusted to flawed, fallible human hands for canonization, transmission, and translation.

And this ongoing dance between archaeology and the ancient text shows us that the story of where the Bible came from, well, it's far from over. It's a story that's still unfolding, leaving us to think about this really complex relationship between faith, history, and the amazing journey of a sacred text through time.